

March 24, 2004

Please accept my comments regarding cell phone access for people with partial deafness.

I have a progressive bi-lateral sensorineural hearing loss in the 95 decible range, which is considered severe. I was in my mid-20s when this was diagnosed. Even though I taught for several years in the profession in which I received my undergraduate degree, I retired from teaching when I was 33 years of age. It was not until I discovered hearing assistive technology that would extend the capabilities of my hearing instruments, years later, that I was able to return to mainstream activities. At age 49 I returned to the university system to earn a Master's Degree, graduating 5 years later at age 54. My work, for the most part, during my years of unemployment, was as a 'professional' volunteer. I was fortunate to not have to work, and enjoyed my years as a stay at home 'mom' and home maker.

Due to the economic turndown of 2001-02, it was necessary for me to assist my family by returning to the work place...this was after a 26 year 'retirement'. Needless to say, it has been difficult, but the fact that I have assistive technology available to me has made it doable. The down side of this is that I purchased most of it, including the hearing instruments I use and the FM system they connect to, with uninsured, out of pocket funds, which represents a large cost to my family. My employer has been kind enough to provide me with items that I did not personally own. Thankfully.

When cell phones became indispensable to everyone but me...simply because I couldn't use one and didn't know how valuable they could be on the job... I realized very quickly that I was totally 'out of the loop'...and that if something was not done to make these wireless phones hearing instrument compatible + with sufficient volume so folks like me could use them effectively, I would be right back to where I was prior to knowing about assistive technology in the first place. I made a point to search for a phone I could use.

The first cell phone I had, which was analog, cost me \$300.00. My husband, who purchased his at the same time from the same provider, paid \$50.00! Even thus, I was thrilled to have a phone I could use fairly well...even if just for emergencies. That was 6 years ago. Needless to say, that phone, is now obsolete on the digital network. I've tried since, with limited success to find a phone I can use. I was pleased to find ONE after considerable searching, not to mention begging the provider to give me a 'fair price'. Again, I paid far more than my husband paid for his. Not fair...for someone who uses this device for perhaps 45 minutes/month! NOTE: When I do use it, it is not frivolously, but for very important communication.

The Hearing Aid Compatibility Act of 1989 was a breakthrough for millions of Americans who are partially deaf like I am. It would be extremely unfortunate for this bill to be watered down by allowing manufacturers to not follow the accessibility rules as they were understood by the original Act.

I have been a subject of testing done by Motorola at the annual national convention of Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc. for the past few years. I continue to be amazed and disappointed that the phones used in these tests are...for whatever reason...not available to the consumers as yet. Too much time is being wasted. These devices are no longer novelties for people of wealth. They are vital to employability as well as to safety, not to mention sanity in today's chaotic world!!!

I urge you to insist that manufacturers comply with the accessibility rights of the American people by providing digital cell phones that are compatible with hearing instruments.

Thank you,

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